

Luke 14:1, 7-14
August 29, 2010

South Plains

Sharp Elbows

The human elbow is like a Swiss army knife; it's a multi-purpose tool. We can use it for holding open the door when our hands are full, rocking a baby to sleep, throwing a curve ball, hanging a basket of flowers, or even waking up your husband in church. We can also use it like a crowbar to pry open a place for ourselves when we are being left out of a group.

Jesus observes sharp elbows at a dinner party as the guests are jockeying for seats of honor around the table. Luke tells this story as though Jesus' presence in the home of a Pharisee was not unusual. I imagine that early in Jesus' career, he was something of a curiosity, an eloquent young man from the boondocks of Galilee, a healer of illnesses that had stumped other miracle workers, a teacher of the scriptures, and even a possible ally for pious Pharisees. So, somebody invites the new rabbi to a dinner party where they can all get a good look at him.

Jesus is not intimidated by being watched closely. He takes the opportunity to watch them closely as well. What he sees is typical dinner party antics as the guests approach the table. They're the same gyrations you and I experience at a dinner party. Where will we sit? Not next to the most obnoxious person in the house. Maybe

beside someone we like. Perhaps we can get the ear of that well-connected socialite if we sit next to her. It's a subtle game. Elbows must be used only metaphorically, or at least discreetly, but they will be used so that we are at the right place at the key moment when the hostess says, "Oh, sit anywhere."

At that moment, seeing that certain people have positioned themselves to take the seats of honor, Jesus tells a parable, not about an ordinary dinner party, but about a wedding banquet. In Jesus' time, wedding banquets were both fun and functional for social climbing. They also evoked pious dreams about the great meal at the end of time, a symbol for God's gathering his chosen people for the blessings of heaven. Every Jew aspired to sit at that heavenly banquet, the wedding feast of the Lamb of God, and although few would say so, everyone secretly hoped their own righteousness would be rewarded by God with some recognition. It's a pious dream, maybe a little too pious.

The moral of Jesus' parable is that it's better to humbly take a bad seat at the banquet and be invited to move up than it is to exalt yourself by claiming the best seat and then being humiliated when you're moved down. It's a variation on the theme that the last will be first and the first will be last. It's a warning against the sharp elbows of greedy ambition, a reminder that pride goes before a fall, a not-so-gentle hint that little things in life can matter a lot to God. It also foreshadows Jesus' humility on the cross and his exaltation three days later.

Of course, the trouble with ambition and pride is that they are so pliable. The very character traits we admire and need for successful living are the same traits that so easily get out of hand when they slide into greed and hubris and arrogance and covetousness. No one is immune to the slippery slope of ambition. According to John Milton, it was no one less than an angel in heaven who fell so far with the temptation of ambition that he eventually said, "Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven."

Ambition and striving are the genius of the human creature. College graduates this year had better demonstrate some ambition in the job interview, or else they might not get any job. Even the desire for power is essential if we are to train good leaders for our nation. Indeed, the best leaders in the church are ambitious, not for personal power and aggrandizement, but they are ambitious for the power to persuade through preaching, the power to serve as elders in Christ's mission, the power to advance the lives of the poor, the power to heal the sick and free the oppressed. Jesus did not shrink from power. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he boldly preached, "because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.... To proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus is ambitious for the gospel.

When we recognize the danger and acknowledge the temptations of an ambitious life, we have taken the first step to the responsible use of power and ambition. False modesty can become a mask for raw lust, a disguised ambition that deceives even its wearer. Our practice of confession, assessing our spiritual weaknesses, is an indispensable first step toward harnessing ambition for God.

A second step is to focus on the right objects of our desire and ambition. Some things are worth doing. Every college and university desires to grow with the best students. A few, including our own Presbyterian Davidson College, have recently adjusted that ambition to the goal of insuring that no student will have to graduate with a debt for their education; and they achieve that goal through a combination of grants and student employment. That's a better goal for the schools and for the students than simply going after better students.

Every church wants to grow, including South Plains. Simply to aspire to more members, who are better members with more money would prostitute the gospel. Or, in the words of Jeremiah, it would amount to changing our gods, changing "our glory for something that does not profit (2:11)." Our goal needs to be growing as disciples of Jesus Christ, growing in service to our neighbors, growing in our ability to bring good news to the poor. That will mean growing carefully in membership. Setting the right goals is a critical second step in any ambition.

A third step toward a holy ambition balances what's good for me and my group with what is good for the whole community. Here's the place where those sharp elbows get into trouble. Basketball players have to learn to tuck their elbows close to their bodies. Contacting your opponent with a shoulder, leaning in his direction, moving your feet in position are all acceptable within the rules, but flying elbows are not acceptable because they hurt players. Churches can hurt the community if we exploit prejudices, or skirt the law, or abuse our position as a corporate conscience. Or, simply keep silence when we could speak the truth. (I won't get into so-called churches that defraud people) The way we go about the practice of Christianity will make an influential witness to the truth of the gospel, and to the glory of God, even among those who reject that truth and ignore that glory. Our mission committee proposes to send money to the flood victims in Muslim Pakistan. Our ambition is to serve not just ourselves, but to serve the larger community to the ends of the earth.

We take a fourth and final step toward what we might call a righteous ambition when we celebrate the best achievements of others. We can do that when our most ambitious goals serve a larger purpose, a truly altruistic achievement. The little island of Haiti found some relief from its suffering by watching the World Cup games. Haiti did not have a competitive soccer team, but they threw their enthusiasm for the game into cheering for Brazil. In turn, Brazil has promised to help Haiti field a

soccer team. Winning is always more than what's best for me and my projects. A joy shared is multiplied many times over.

North American Christianity is suffering a period of retraction as churches shrink or close, Christian spirituality is forced to share the stage with other religions, and moral standards we associate with our faith are elbowed to the side. That's the bad news. The good news is that Christianity is surging in China and exploding south of the equator. If we will, we can celebrate that evangelism. Not only the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind have come to the banquet; developing nations to the south and east are coming. And, we will be blessed, because they cannot repay us, as Jesus says. We can rejoice that darker skinned peoples are finding their place at the Lord's Table. And, that, after all has been the ambition of the church from the time the resurrected Christ charged his disciples to baptize all nations.

So then, what's the payoff for harnessing ambition, directing it toward worthwhile goals, expanding those goals to serve the world, and all the while monitoring the health of our striving? Jesus says in the parable that our host may invite us to move up to a seat of honor. That's the reward for humility in the parable, but parables must be interpreted. This is another place where caution is indicated. Jesus is not saying that we can hide our ambition by taking a lower place as some sort of Machiavellian strategy for our real goal of a better seat at

the table. He is promising the recognition and approval of our heavenly host.

I love the image of heaven as the wedding feast of the Lamb of God.... I love to eat. But seriously, I really don't think it's going to make any difference where we sit at that table because the best part of that invitation will be the approval and praise of God. Not God's praise for what a good boy I've been as a son, husband, father, citizen or pastor. In all the most important roles of life, we fall short. Even when we do our best, we stumble and fall, our clumsiness covered by the grace of God, our faults hidden by the mysterious dance of the Holy Spirit, and whatever sin remains is forgiven in the cross.

At that table, God will be toasting the church for what we have become in Christ. God's approval will rain down on us all with a blessing that surprises because of its breadth, bringing all to our feet, and raising a roar of cheering glory not for what we have done but for what Christ achieves in his mission of love, transforming heaven and earth as a banquet of happiness.

Wherever we're sitting, we want to be there.